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SUBJECT: TURKISH CYPRIOT OPPOSITION ELECTS NEW LEADER

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[B](#). 05 NICOSIA 1465
[C](#). LIBBY-INGMANSON EMAIL (12/09/2005)

Classified By: Ambassador R. Schlicher, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY. The National Unity Party (UBP) has elected Nicosia "MP" Huseyin Ozgurgun (see bio below) to lead the party, which is the second largest Turkish Cypriot political party and the north's main opposition formation. Ozgurgun represents a new, young face for his party -- which was thrown out of office in 2003 after over two decades in power, and has since been unable to shake the image of a reactionary clique of corrupt old men. Ozgurgun must now focus on the daunting task of reversing his party's fortunes by June, when Turkish Cypriots go to the polls to fill two empty "parliamentary" seats and vote on all of the "TRNC's" mayors and city councils. The UBP's success or failure in these elections will reflect on more than just Ozgurgun's leadership; a resurgent nationalist opposition could spell trouble for pro-settlement "President" Talat and his CTP.
END SUMMARY.

ADRIFT, THE UBP GETS A NEW RUDDER

[2](#). (U) The north's main opposition grouping, the nationalist UBP, has elected Nicosia "MP" Huseyin Ozgurgun as party president. The 40-year-old Ozgurgun emerged from a crowded pack of dark-horse candidates after Dervis Eroglu's heir apparent, Salih Miroglu, died unexpectedly a few weeks before he was to have taken over the top job (ref a). Ozgurgun defeated former "FM" and fellow Nicosia "MP" Tahsin Ertugruloglu by 540 votes to 410 at the UBP's February 11 Party Congress, putting to an end several months of uncertainty that began with the resignation of party leader and former "PM" Dervis Eroglu in September 2005 (ref b).

[3](#). (SBU) The party's leadership crisis dates back to December 2003, however, when the pro-settlement CTP upset the long-ruling UBP in legislative elections that brought Mehmet Ali Talat to power as "PM." Subsequent Turkish Cypriot polls -- including the April 2004 Annan referendum and Talat's April 2005 knock-out defeat of Eroglu for the "TRNC presidency" -- have been unmitigated disasters for the UBP. The party, which opposed the Annan Plan and campaigned in favor of a harder line vis-a-vis the Greek Cypriots, has appeared increasingly out of step with Turkish Cypriot public opinion, and no longer benefits from the political and material support it enjoyed from Ankara prior to the AKP government. With the directionless party foundering in the polls, the graying Eroglu's decision to step down and make way for a "new generation" was universally welcomed inside the UBP as the only way to start winning elections again.

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE LESS OLD

¶4. (C) Ozgurgun's election has exposed serious divisions within the party over the way ahead, however. Ertugruloğlu (as well as other candidates like Irsen Kucuk, the "Tahsin Lite" figure who eventually supported him) unapologetically advocated a hard right turn. Stressing that Turkish Cypriot support for the Annan Plan had failed to deliver an end to the north's "isolation," Ertugruloğlu advocated a more vigorous defense of "TRNC" sovereignty as a response to the failed "promises" and unmet obligations of the international community toward the Turkish Cypriots. Ozgurgun, however, took a more nuanced line, insisting that the UBP needs to "respect the will" of the 65 percent of Turkish Cypriots who voted "yes" to Annan, and suggesting that the UBP must also shake off the image of corrupt cronyism it earned over decades in power by developing a more business-friendly, "center-right" message. At the same time, Ozgurgun sought to burnish his own nationalist credentials by actively challenging the controversial property restitution law recently passed by the CTP "government" (ref c).

¶5. (C) Ozgurgun's victory, however, seems less due to ideology than to personality and electoral calculus. Many UBP supporters recognized that the fire-brand Ertugruloğlu was "too radical" to appeal to most mainstream voters -- and might leave the party even worse off than it had been under the uninspiring Eroğlu. At the same time, the young, athletic Ozgurgun seemed to present at once a more appealing face to local voters (scoring higher than Tahsin in 2005 legislative elections) and to the outside world (he is one of two Turkish Cypriot representatives at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where he is by all accounts well respected). While many UBPers may sympathize with Tahsin's angry rhetoric, they appeared to feel that

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Ozgurgun stood a better chance of helping their party at the ballot box.

¶6. (C) The most important factor in Ozgurgun's victory, however, was probably the support of Eroğlu. Although no longer a credible candidate for "national" office, Eroğlu still maintains significant influence over the party's grass-roots members, many of whom owe their positions as Party Congress delegate, "MP," or city councilman to Eroğlu. UBP insiders say Eroğlu urged his allies to vote for Ozgurgun, and that they were happy to oblige -- partly as a way to soothe their guilt over pressing Eroğlu to step aside in the first place. This has led to speculation that wet-behind-the-ears Ozgurgun may end up being a puppet of Eroğlu, who remains in "parliament" and could continue to run the party, Lee Kwan Yew-style, from behind the scenes.

JUNE ELECTIONS: OZGURGUN'S LITMUS TEST

¶7. (SBU) With municipal elections -- as well as by-elections to fill two empty "parliamentary" seats -- due in June, Ozgurgun must immediately take to the hustings for his party. The UBP's impressive grass-roots organization is planning to mount a municipal campaign in every district, and with two open seats in "parliament," the party could theoretically emerge in a position to oust the current CTP-led coalition of "PM" Ferdi Soyer. But the chances of such a sweep appear slim.

¶8. (C) For one thing, the UBP does not have its hands on the levers of power and cannot dole out pre-election goodies to win support as it did in the past. Pragmatic Turkish Cypriot voters are less inclined to support a party they perceive to be corrupt if they are not getting a piece of the action themselves. Fresh blood at the top may help counter this image, but the party continues to poll very poorly among young swing voters despite its handsome new leaders.

¶9. (C) Furthermore, divisions between the UBP's radical and pragmatic wings have not healed and will continue to hamper efforts to articulate a coherent alternative to the CTP's pro-solution platform. Disappointment over Talat's failure to deliver an end to Turkish Cypriot "isolation" -- as well as frustration over domestic issues like public sector pay raises -- "will only get us so far," Ozgurgun confided to us.

He also noted that the party is having trouble finding candidates to run in June. UBP needs volunteers who are at once personally electable, willing to toe a vaguely nationalist line, and not already in office or with some other party. Such people are as rare as hen's teeth in the limited north Cyprus talent pool.

¶10. (C) With so little time to overcome these problems, few observers expect the UBP under Ozgurgun to do more than tread water in June's elections. If the party can keep most of the municipalities it already controls -- or even pick up a few -- the election will be a success and help cement Ozgurgun's position as leader. Wresting one of the "big three" cities (Nicosia, Famagusta, or Kyrenia) from CTP control or winning one of the "parliamentary" seats would be much more difficult. But if Ozgurgun can manage either feat, his fortunes as leader would be boosted further.

¶11. (C) If UBP suffers further reverses, however, Ozgurgun could well be replaced. Another party congress is due in December (this weekend's gathering was an interim meeting to elect a replacement to serve out the remainder of Eroglu's term as party president), and members may want to eject their new leadership if there is no electoral good news. In this case, another radical-vs.-pragmatic showdown would be unavoidable and could lead to an open schism.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) The UBP leadership contest is more than just a side-show soap opera. The lack of an effective opposition has meant that the CTP "government" has enjoyed an unnaturally long honeymoon -- despite growing public frustration with "PM" Soyer's domestic performance and "President" Talat's failure to deliver the goods on "isolation" and the Cyprus problem. If Ozgurgun can whip the UBP into shape and do well at the ballot box, the pro-solution CTP would face serious difficulty. A reinvigorated nationalist opposition could prompt Talat and Soyer to cover their right flank by staking out a harder line on the Cyprus problem and/or driving a tougher bargain on confidence-building measures like Ledra Street or the Committee on Missing Persons. END COMMENT.

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BIOGRAPHY OF HUSEYIN OZGURGUN

¶13. (C) Huseyin Ozgurgun was born in Nicosia in 1965. He graduated from Ankara University's Faculty of Political Science in 1988 and later did course work in English and management at Cambridge. He is an avid athlete who has competed in amateur track-and-field events abroad, and plays basketball, volley ball, tennis, and soccer on the "TRNC national" teams. Ozgurgun began his political career in the center-right DP of Serdar Denktash -- but quit the party after separating from his wife, Serdar's sister-in-law, and joined the UBP. Now divorced, Ozgurgun has been conducting a quiet romance with a parliamentarian from Andorra whom he met at the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly -- where he has served as one of two Turkish Cypriot party representatives since 2004. He reportedly has good contact with his two children from his marriage. Ozgurgun was elected to "parliament" three times on the UBP ticket (1998, 2003, 2005), becoming party SYG and Dervis Eroglu's heir apparent as party leader after the death of Salih Miroglu in November 2005. Ozgurgun is a close Embassy contact, and was

selected as an IV program participant in 2005 (although his new duties as party leader may make it difficult for him to schedule his participation).

¶14. (C) Ozgurgun is a gregarious fellow, whose athletic good looks add to his charisma. At 40, however, he is much younger than most other leading Turkish Cypriot politicians and can seem like a callow, johnny-come-lately compared to many of them. While clearly no fool, Ozgurgun does not project the same image of intellectual sophistication as some of his rivals. Nonetheless, he is an effective politician who can quickly read his audience and calibrate his message to a variety of situations -- he is as at ease hobnobbing with European parliamentarians in Strasbourg as he is campaigning in peasant villages in the Karpas. It is too early to tell which of these instincts will prove stronger, and whether as leader he will take the UBP down a center-right reformist path or stick close to its reactionary nationalist roots. He speaks passable English.
SCHLICHER